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Summary

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Exploratory literature study

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Naar een rijbewijs met punten in België? Verkennende literatuurstudie.

Summary

Penalty point licensing systems

In a penalty point licensing system, the holder of a driving licence can obtain penalty points for traffic rule violations registered by the police. Some systems apply the reverse logic and deduce points. When a certain threshold is reached, one can temporarily lose one's driving licence, sometimes in combination with other sanctions. The gained (or lost) points usually expire after 2 or 3 years.

Scope

The present report presents the results of an exploratory literature study literature on penalty point systems, as introduced in several European countries. Special attention is given to the principles underlying a penalty point system and to the effects it may have.

Main results

Most experts agree that a penalty point licensing systems can lead to a decrease in the number of traffic rule violations. Penalty point systems are generally regarded as fair, adequate and acceptable. They can serve as a preventive measure to reduce the number of road crash victims.

Within the European Union, 22 of the 28 Member States have already introduced a penalty point system, However, no two systems are identical. The underlying rules and their practical implementation are very diverse. For example, there are differences in the violations covered by the system, in the number of points that one loses or gains in case of a certain violation, how the points are recorded, etc. This diversity has arisen because the systems have been introduced based on existing national procedures and within the social and cultural context of the different countries. Moreover, the application of the points systems across national borders is also dependent on bilateral cooperation agreements.

Despite the widespread use of penalty point systems, the number of scientific studies regarding these systems is rather limited. There are some studies on how particular penalty point system are organised and how they were introduced. Other studies looked into the differences in accident statistics before and after the introduction of the system. The number of in-depth effects studies is however limited. These types of studies are difficult to conduct because, in addition to the penalty point system itself, there are also numerous other variables that determine the evolution of road safety.

The available scientific effect studies indicate that after the introduction of a penalty point system, the number of traffic rule violations as well as the number of road crash victims usually decrease. Relatively large decreases were observed in several countries, while in others the effect was small or almost inexistent.

However, the studies also show that these positive outcomes are usually limited in time. Overall, the positive effects seem to last for approximately a year and a half. Researchers argue that the effects appear to be primarily dependent on the level of law enforcement and on the accompanying communication awareness-raising campaigns. Only with adequate levels of enforcement and communication the introduction of a penalty point system would have lasting effects. The dissipation of the effects over time would mostly be due to a decrease in the perceived probability of detection. At the outset, drivers think that there is a higher chance of being checked and penalised within the system of a penalty point licensing system, but gradually they notice that the chance of being caught remains relatively low.

Recommendations

This study shows that a penalty point system can help increase road safety, at least during the initial period after the introduction. However, before introducing a penalty point system a thorough preliminary study is essential, both with regard to the nature of the penalty point system as well as regarding the operational and practical implementation. The cost regarding the implementation, the roll out and the maintenance of the system has also to be thoroughly examined and weighed against the expected increase of the road safety. If the results of such a cost-benefit analysis turn out to be positive, the Belgian Road Safety Institute also recommends introducing a penalty point system in Belgium.

If such would be done in a hasty manner and without the necessary accompanying measures, the effects will be limited and temporary. When introducing this system the population will need to be informed extensively about the system and its intended objectives. The introduction of penalty point system will only be meaningful if a sufficient level of enforcement can be guaranteed beyond the start-up phase. Repeated communication and awareness-raising will be required to maintain the effects. To ensure effectiveness, efforts will also have to be made regarding a wide range of measures and alternative sanctions for traffic violations. In addition, special attention must be paid to determining how a possible penalty point system can be embedded within the Belgian legal framework. Partly due to the planned regionalisation of a number of traffic violations (e.g. speeding) in January 2015, cooperation between the federal and regional levels will also be required.



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